



The Contributions of Women in the Civil War

In one way or another all women were involved in the Civil War. Just like men, they were united in character, ideals and in allegiance to their cause. This purpose bound women of all classes together in an unusual harmony and gave them strength and inspiration to engage in work usually performed by men.



With Bayonet and Sword They Served

Not all who wore the uniform were men. A large but undeterminable number of women actually served as soldiers. These women entered the ranks motivated by patriotism or the desire to be near their husbands or sweethearts. Since army policy restricted military duty to men only, the women who joined the ranks did so by disguising themselves as men. In many cases the deception was carried out for long periods of time.

Loretta Velazquez donned the Confederate uniform, enlisted as Lieutenant Harry T. Buford and recruited a company of volunteers from Arkansas. In the spring of 1862, after fleeing from authorities who had discovered her sex, she enlisted with the 21st Louisiana Infantry. According to Loretta, her participation in the Battle of Shiloh was her greatest military triumph. On the battlefield, her regiment became engaged alongside the men she had recruited in Arkansas:

"We had not long been engaged before the second lieutenant of the company fell. I immediately stepped into his place, and assumed the command. This action was greeted by a hearty cheer from the entire company... This cheer from the men was an immense inspiration to me... (it) encouraged me to dare everything, and to shrink from nothing to render myself deserving of their praises."

After the battle Velazquez was wounded by a shell while burying the dead. An army doctor once again discovered that she was a woman. Believing that too many people knew her true identity, she finally gave up her uniform.

Union patriot Lizzie Compton was but sixteen years old when her identity was revealed for a second time. Compton was serving in the 25th Michigan Infantry when she was wounded by a minie ball. She recovered and it is unknown whether or not she enlisted for a third time.

The Alleviation of Suffering

In both the North and South, women played an important role in Civil War medicine. Many women had learned of the efforts of Florence Nightingale in improving hospital conditions during the Crimean War. This and the realization that so many sick and wounded men needed attention led scores of women to enter the previously male dominated occupation of nursing. Such a decision represented real courage on their part, since none of the women had any experience beyond tending to family members and the application of home remedies.

Kate Cumming left family and friends in Mobile to begin a career as a nurse with the Confederate Army of the Mississippi (later designated the Army of Tennessee). She was first assigned duty at Corinth, Mississippi receiving wounded men from the Battle of Shiloh. Later Cumming signed on as a matron with a mobile hospital system, which followed the Army of Tennessee through several western states during the course of the war.

Women nurses worked mainly in general hospitals away from the fighting, but some did share the hardships and dangers of field hospitals. Mrs. Jersuha R. Small, followed her husband, a soldier with an Iowa unit, and became a nurse in the regimental hospitals.

At Shiloh, the tent in which she was caring for a number of wounded men, was struck by enemy shells. She was forced to remove her patients to a

point beyond the range of fire. After the most arduous service, extending over several weeks, she was struck down with disease and died. Just before her death, Mrs. Small said the following about her service to the wounded:

"...I think I have been the means of saving some lives,... and these I consider of far more value than mine, for now they can go and help our country in its hour of need."



"This patriot looked upon the war as certainly yours as well as that of the men. We cannot fight, so must take care of those who do."

-Kate Cumming

"War seems inevitable, and while I am trying to employ the passing hour, a cloud still hangs over us all and all that surrounds us. All ages, all conditions, meet now on one common platform. We must all work for our country..."

-Judith Brockenbrough McGuire

"It is a woman's mission...to soothe, to bind up, and to heal...the soldiers of our Southern Army." Mrs. C.E. Trueheart who wrote these words was prepared to devote her "...time, energy, strength and if necessary my life to the alleviation of the suffering of those who have left homes, and their all for their country."

Stepping into Vacated Shoes

"We are very weak in resources, but strong in stout hearts, zeal for the cause, and enthusiastic devotion to our beloved South; and while men are making a free-will offering of their life's blood on the alter of their country, women must not be idle. We must do what we can for the comfort of our brave men. We must sew for them, nurse the sick, keep up the faint hearted, give them a word of encouragement... There is much for us to do, and we must do it."

-Judith Brockenbrough McGuire

Throughout the North and the South women formed organizations with the principal purposes of caring for the sick and wounded, providing clothing and provisions not supplied by the government or army, and keeping the families of soldiers informed of their condition.

The 1862 Shiloh/Corinth Campaign aroused into immediate action women's associations in western Alabama. Mary Dyas, the president of the Florence Military Aid Society, drove a wagon to Iuka, Mississippi on the Memphis and Charleston R.R. and brought back casualties to the society's medical center. Other members assembled at the boat landing "with vehicles of every kind" for carrying men to hospitals and private homes.

With increasing economic pressures and the difficulties of war, many women, especially those living in towns and cities, sought employment in industry and government service. Some worked in ordnance plants making minie balls, paper cartridges, percussion caps, fuses and shells. Others labored in the textile mills and garment factories, aiding the cause by making uniforms for the soldiers. In the early months of the war the Confederate government supplied women with material, and it was common practice for groups of women to sew uniforms for entire companies.

The profession of Teaching, which had been performed primarily by men prior to the war,



provided employment for some women. Most female teachers were usually members of upper class families deprived of their normal means of support.

With the men gone from the farms and plantations, women had to assume major responsibilities for running the agricultural operations. Women with or without help of children were forced to plow the fields, plant the crops, harvest, and perform all the other chores necessary to keep their family owned farms or plantations from going under.

Sharing the Hardships and Tragedy

The contributions of women, both to the comfort and efficiency of the armies, and to the care of the sick and wounded soldiers was on the same vast scale of the war itself. An estimated 300,000 women entered the workforce during the war. Scores of women gave their support through work at home. Assistance to the cause, on both sides of the issue, began with the first call for volunteers and continued throughout the war. Women did not urge their husbands, brothers, and sons to go to war without themselves following as far and as closely as they were allowed. In sharing the hardships of war, many women lost their lives, directly or indirectly, in the consequences of their labors.

One who followed to Shiloh was Ann Wallace, wife of Brig. Gen. William H. L. Wallace of Ottawa, Illinois. On this tragic field Mrs. Wallace had present, besides her husband, a father, two brothers, two brothers-in-law, and several more distant relatives. At daylight on 6 April 1862, Ann arrived by steamboat at Pittsburg Landing for a surprise visit to her husband. Unfortunately, the battle began and interrupted her plans for reunion. On that fatal day, history's course spared all of Ann's loved ones, except her "Will". That afternoon, General Wallace fell mortally wounded during the climax of the Hornets' Nest action. Near sundown, Ann was informed Will was dead and that his body lay on ground held by the Confederates. The next day, however, to her amazement, Will was found still alive. For three days, Ann cherished "this gift" to

share a last few moments together. When Wallace died on April 10, Ann praised God that they had been granted the opportunity to say good-by:

"I had now lost him..., but the blow was not as heavy as when I first heard he was killed on the battlefield... God had led me there, so that I should not meet the great sorrow alone."

...I was quite alone that fearful night [April 6, 1862]. God gave me strength and I spent much of the night in bathing the fevered brows and limbs of the sufferers around me, and it was slight help to aid men who were suffering in the cause for which Will had given his life."

-Ann Wallace at Shiloh



Ann Wallace, 1877

Ann returned home to raise Isabel, their adopted daughter, alone. Her love for Will never died and she never remarried.

They had heard the news of battle,
But not the names of the dead.
And in thought they were seeking their loved one
On a battle-field trampled and red.

The mother, in widow'd garments,
Sat upright with face of stone.
Striving bravely to bear both sorrows,
Her country's grief and her own.

-from THE SOLDIERS FIRESIDE,
AFTER A BATTLE (1864)
-Poet Unknown

If you would like to learn more about the contributions of women during the Civil War, the following books are suggested:

- Confederate Women. Bell I. Wiley, Greenwood Press, 1975.
- Partners in Rebellion. H. E. Sterkx, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970.
- Heroines of Dixie. Katharine M. Jones, The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1955.
- Civil War Nurse. John R. Brumgardt, University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1980.
- The Women and the Crisis: Women of the North in the Civil War. Agatha Young, McDowell, Obolensky Inc., New York, 1959

